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## GRAYING OF THE FLEET

# As fishermen grow older, who will catch the Gulf's bounty?

Young people have not been entering the commercial fishing industry across the Gulf Coast. A new federal program aims to attract new fishermen.

Todd A. Price, *The American South*

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**R**yan Bradley is a fisherman. He was born and raised in Long Beach, Mississippi, on the Gulf of Mexico. All year long, he takes a 32-foot catamaran, with a crew of one or two, into the Gulf to catch red snapper. A day or a day-and-a-half after setting out, he returns with whole fish that he sells to restaurants throughout Mississippi.

"It's just a great feeling of independence. Being your own boss, at sea alone with nobody to bother you," Bradley said. "And it's beautiful, getting to see sunrise and sunset and all the marine life you encounter."

Like most fishermen in the United States, Bradley was born into the profession. He is the fifth generation of his family to earn a living on the water.

What makes Bradley unusual is his age: 33 years old. Fishermen are getting older. Young men and women are choosing other careers. Old fishermen keep working, with no sons or daughters to take over and few buyers for boats that will be their

nest egg for retirement.

It's called "the graying of the fleet." The problem was first noticed and studied in Alaska, but the average age of fishermen has been rising throughout America for decades. In the Gulf South, the average commercial fisherman is nearly 51, more than a year above the national average. In 2016, fishermen were on average three years younger.



Fisherman Ryan Bradley at Pass Christian Harbor on Wednesday, May 12, 2021 in Pass Christian, Mississippi.

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### Why aren't more young people fishing as a profession?

The issue is, "knowledge is passed down from one generation to next," Bradley said. "There's no school or university. If you don't have younger kids doing it, you don't have folks that are going to take over and run these boats."

Rising costs have kept young people from becoming fishermen. Fuel, ice, bait and boats have become more expensive, while the prices paid for fish, shrimp, oysters and crabs have not kept up. The quota system, designed to manage fish populations, is an additional expense for anyone catching the most sought after Gulf finfish.

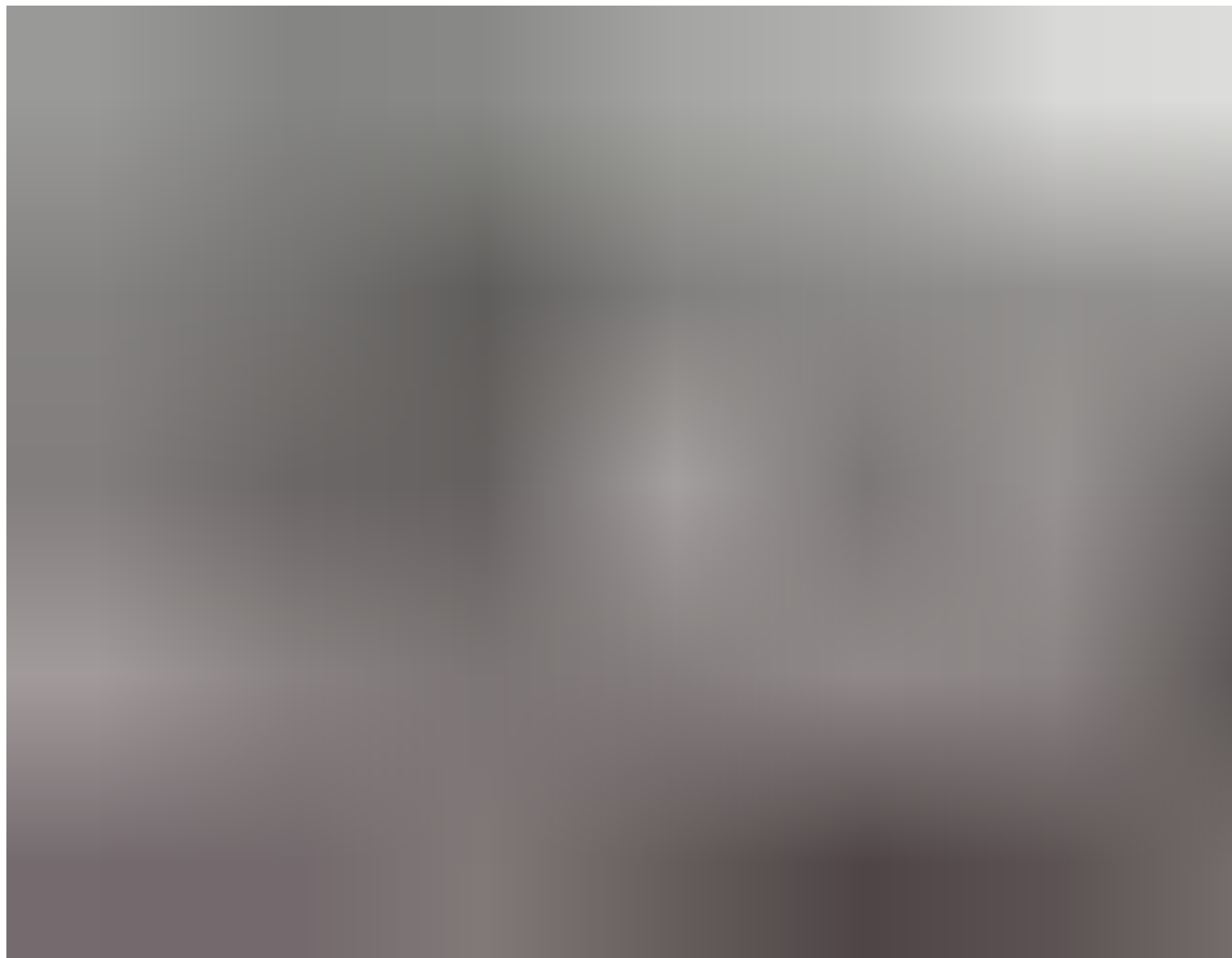
Bradley said he has to lease red snapper quota for roughly \$4 per pound. He normally sells the fish for \$6 pound, meaning he only keeps \$2. The quotas for commercial fisheries can now be owned by people who do not fish, including speculators and restaurant groups, putting catch limits in the hands of people who are not catching the fish.

Captains also complain that reliable and well-trained deckhands are hard to find. They often say younger people lack the work ethic to succeed as fishermen.

Cultural changes have also pushed young people out of fishing. Dominique Seibert, a marine biologist, works as a marine extension agent for Louisiana Sea Grant, helping commercial fishermen in St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes. Seibert, in

her 30s, grew up in Plaquemines Parish, although her family members were farmers. She saw many of her friends from fishing families choose other careers.

"I really do believe it's basically a change in the human dynamics from the 80s and 90s," she said. "To go to college was hammered into us. Go to college right after high school and get a career."



Shrimp boats, some in disrepair, are docked at Pass Christian Harbor. Once shrimp boats could be found in great numbers here, but the opening day...

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Seibert can't think of any friends fishing who weren't born into the industry. And she knows people her age who have left fishing.

"It's not necessarily that they made the choice to get out as things like the opening of the Bonnet Carré spillway affected the fishing that year. Their catch was so low that they trained to get certified in welding," she said.

The Bonnet Carré Spillway is used to relieve pressure on the Mississippi River levees by keeping the river below flood levels in New Orleans. But in the process, it unleashes fresh water into bays that can kill oysters, blue crabs and shrimp in the Gulf. In recent years, climate change-driven spring floods in the Midwest have led to more frequent openings of the spillway.

"To me, predominantly, it's a loss of culture," Seibert said about the decline of young fishermen. "And it's a loss of value to the state."



The shrimp boat Buccaneer languishes in Bayou Segnette awaiting a buyer. The boat owner's uncle said the shrimp boat was put out of commission by the BP oil spill and has been for sale for several years. Photographed on Friday, May 14, 2021 in Westwego, Louisiana.

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### **Commercial fishermen are a 'line of defense for Gulf resources'**

The Gulf of Mexico is the United State's second most productive fishery after Alaska. In 2018, the commercial catch from the Gulf states was worth more than \$887 million, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The most valuable species from the Gulf are shrimp, menhaden, oysters, crabs, spiny lobster, red snapper and red grouper.

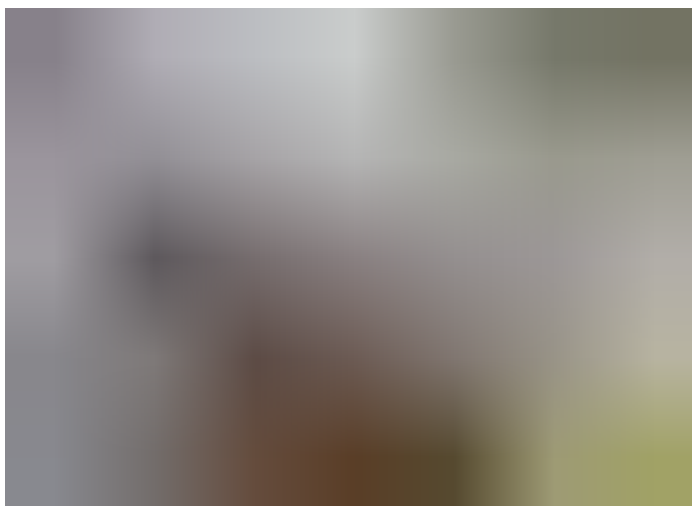
"It really boils down to the food security issue," said LaDon Swann, director of the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium, about the importance of local fishermen. "If we have to import all our seafood, then we're not very food secure. I think fisheries, in general, in the U.S. are well managed, whereas it may not be the case in other countries."

Food safety concerns have also frequently been raised about imported seafood.

As climate change reshapes the coast and alters the Gulf's waters, men and women who work on the water also provide insights for conservationists.

"Commercial fishermen are kind of this line of defense for Gulf resources, because they rely on them for their businesses and their livelihoods," said Ashford Rosenberg, policy analyst for the Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders' Alliance. "If these people age out and retire, you lose this voice."

Rosenberg hopes the new Young Fishermen's Development Act, signed into law January 2021, will encourage more people to take up fishing. The law, modeled after the USDA's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program, will support training in fishing communities across the United States.



The Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders' Alliance is leading a pilot program in Florida, which they hope will eventually be funded

Shrimp is weighed out at Wade's Seafood Shack in the Westwego Shrimp Lot. Photographed on Friday, May 14, 2021 in Westwego, Louisiana.

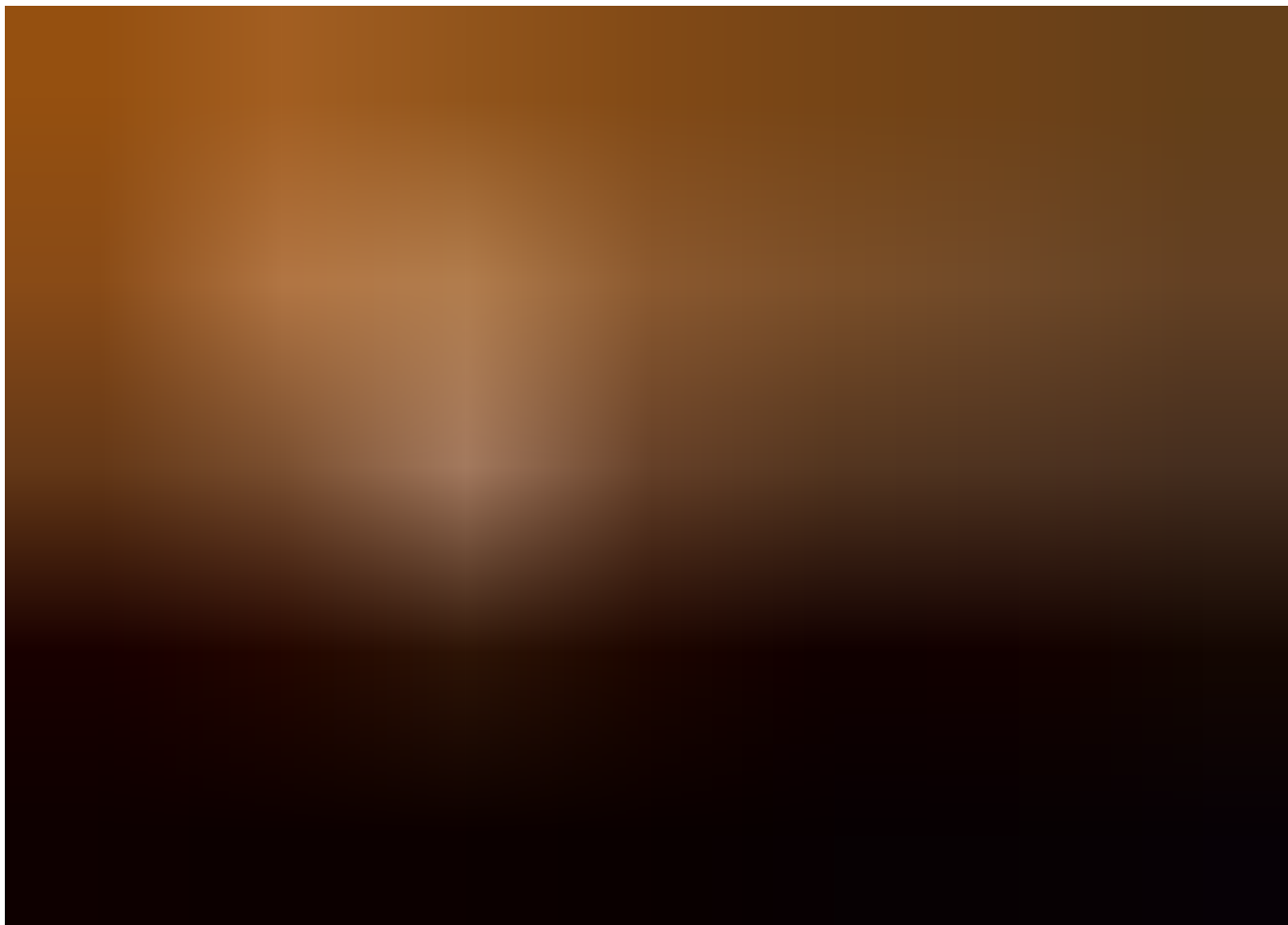
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by the Young Fishermen's Development Act, to train new crew members and match them with experienced mentors in the industry.

"We need good, qualified crew to start bolstering that part of the fishery, and then we can grow from there and help those people," Rosenberg said.

Eventually, they hope to expand the program to the entire Gulf Coast.

"The timing couldn't be better for this," said Eric Brazer, deputy director of the Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders' Alliance. "I'm optimistic that 20 years (from now) we can look back and see this as pivotal."



Fishing boats are docked at sunrise on Bayou Bienvenue on Wednesday, May 26, 2021 in New Orleans, Louisiana.

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Ryan Bradley, the fisherman from Long Beach, Mississippi, advocates for his industry as the executive director of Mississippi Commercial Fisheries United. He believes the entire Gulf fishing industry must fundamentally change to attract more young people. The costs need to be lower and the rewards higher.

"I have no faith that (the) Young Fishermen's Develop Act alone is going to have any impact at all," he said.

Bradley has two sons. The oldest, who is 11, has no interest in fishing. Bradley is fine with that. The youngest, only 9 years old, is a natural fisherman. Bradley, however, will not encourage his youngest to become the sixth generation of his family to fish.

"It's a tough life. It requires you to be away from family a lot," he said. "You're depending on the weather. It seems here lately, there have been more bad years than good. But it can be rewarding. It's a great feeling when you have a lucky catch and make a ton of money in one day. That's what gets you hooked."

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